

MINUTES
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BOARD OF SELECTMEN
MONDAY, MAY 15, 2006
REGULAR SESSION
SELECTMEN'S MEETING ROOM, TOWN HALL
7:00 PM

Call to Order

A regular meeting of the Board was called to order in open session at 7:00 PM in the Selectmen's Meeting Room at Town Hall. All members were present. Town Administrator Tom Younger and Assistant Town Administrator Jeff Conti were also present.

Questions from Town Residents

There were no questions.

Action by Appointment

Discussion of Benton Library

Hal Shubin, Chairman of the Board of Library Trustees and two other Trustees appeared before the Board.

Chairman Shubin explained that the Trustees are considering a temporary closure of the Benton library. He introduced the branch librarian, Elizabeth Strachan. In 2004-2005, circulation at the Benton branch was less than 2% of circulation and traffic. The overall cost to run the branch is about \$66,500. Closing the branch will save less than that because Ms. Strachan will still be working at the main library. The Trustees are projecting a net savings of \$8-9000. They are also looking at the closure of the main library on Sundays and summer Saturdays, so this Benton closure could help defray some of that. There will be further discussion on this topic at tomorrow night's Board of Trustees meeting.

Resident Virginia Jordan said the Benton is a valuable community asset. It's accessible for people who don't drive. It could serve the community better for very little money. Is the Town willing to accept contributions from the community to keep Benton open? She said she represents the 230 residents who signed the petition to keep the library open.

Resident Kathy Duff asked if the circulation is increasing. Mr. Shubin said it did increase from 2004 to 2005. Ms. Duff said that the Benton Library is accessible by public transportation. The children's programs are filled to capacity. The Trustees have not done a needs assessment to see who would use this resource. The question is what is the level of use in the community, not in the town as a whole.

Resident Ray Comeau said another way needs to be found to utilize and maintain this resource for the library. He said he is present together with members of the Oakley Neighborhood Association, who would be happy to meet with the Trustees to come up with ways to preserve this resource and figure out a better way to utilize it.

Resident Janet Grant of Old Middlesex Road said that the identity of this corner of town is a little threatened. There is no local school anymore. The park becomes a community focus only a few weekends a year. The Senior Center will be moving. The neighborhood needs something to hang its identity on. The Benton serves as a community center. The bulletin boards are full. Sometimes you can't get to the door because of all the strollers. It's the center of that side of Belmont.

Resident Richard Cheek asked if the decision to close this building, which was given by the Benton family to be a library, is made, what will happen to the building? Chairman Solomon said that decision has not been made. Mr. Cheek said if the Town does decide to vacate he hopes we can preserve this historic building.

Mr. Shubin said the Trustees have not discussed the idea of private contributions but it needs to be talked about. The Trustees would need to be sure that the funding would be in place.

It was clarified that the \$8-9000 figure takes into account the cost of continuing to provide basic utilities while the Benton is closed.

Resident Joanna Hilgenberg said residents need to know how much money would be needed to keep the Benton open. The Trustees agreed to come up with a figure for their meeting tomorrow night.,

Resident Bill Engstrom said the Benton is a significant location for early education in Belmont. It is especially important now that the Waverley has closed. Belmont has never focused on early education. The Benton library helps educate parents as well as children. It's one of the few places where stay-at-home moms can meet other people, especially if they don't have a car.

Resident Bradley Lewis said that his family was very excited to live one block from the Benton library. If the Trustees are going to make a decision based on circulation, they have to take into account the hours the library is open – when working people cannot use it. He said he heard about this through the grapevine and was disappointed that there was not more discussion about this in the paper or other notification to residents.

Discussion of Town Meeting Issues

The Board noted it has already voted on the Historic Accessory Building By-Law which is now to be discussed under the Special Town Meeting.

There was discussion of whether this would be taken up first or postponed until after the budget articles. Chairman Solomon will discuss this with the Moderator.

The Board noted it has also taken a position on Article 10, the Position and Classification plan.

Article 6: Salaries of elected officials

Chairman Solomon noted that the Warrant Committee decreased the Town Clerk's salary increase by 1% to keep it in line with the increases other officials are receiving.

The Board moved: to support Article 6.

The motion was carried unanimously (3-0).

Article 11: Capital Budget

The Board moved: to support the main motion under Article 11.

The motion was carried unanimously (3-0).

The Board moved: to support the second motion under Article 11.

The motion was carried unanimously (3-0).

Article 4: Budget Appropriation

The Board moved: to support Article 4.

The motion was carried unanimously (3-0).

Article 3: Balance Transfers

The Board moved: to support Article 3

The motion was carried unanimously (3-0).

Article 26: The Board previously voted unanimously to approve.

Mr. Conti reported that the Board of Assessors continues to support reducing the rate to 4.5% and is not inclined to dismiss the article at this time.

Selectman Brownsberger said the Town would be losing money at that rate. This raises management and cash flow issues for the Treasurer. Rather than be a bank ourselves, the Town should work with the banks to find solutions to help seniors stay in their homes.

Selectman Firenze asked why should the Town offer this at a higher than market rate. Recognizing the difficulty for seniors struggling with high taxes, it is important to send that message with whatever the Town does.

Selectman Brownsberger said he would support reducing the rate to 7 or 6.5 percent as a gesture.

The Board moved: to change its vote on the article to approval contingent on a wording change from 4.5% to 6.5%.

The motion was carried unanimously (3-0).

Chairman Solomon will report this to the Warrant Committee.

Discussion of Coalition Health Insurance

Firefighter Ken Gardiner, Ken Donnelly from Professional Firefighters of Massachusetts and Carol Chandor from Boston Benefit Partners appeared before the Board representing the Town's unions to give a presentation on coalition bargaining. Town Counsel Dave Jenkins also appeared.

Mr. Donnelly began by noting that the problem facing the Town is projected increases of 7-14% in health insurance costs. Massachusetts has the highest costs of any state in the US and has more state mandates than any other state. This creates great pressure on municipal budgets. Also, the GASB liability will be a long-term cost issue. The bargaining process is cumbersome because the Town has to negotiate with each union separately in order to make any changes. This makes it hard to change health insurance in a timely fashion.

Generally, employer proposals in the area of health insurance are in the areas of cost shifting or benefit elimination and these must be negotiated with each union. These negotiations can drag out and unions can file unfair labor practice complaints. This can lead to grievance and arbitration or lawsuit. The Dennis decision said that health insurance is mandatorily subject to bargaining with the unions.

Mr. Donnelly said the question is how can unions and management work together to reduce costs?

The unions are asking the Selectmen to accept Chapter 32B, Section 19 of the General Laws authorizing coalition bargaining. Mr. Donnelly said this process provides management the ability to bargain structural changes with all unions at once and ensures

that retirees get the same deal as employees. It also empowers the unions to make tough decisions. Changes can be bargained quickly and efficiently. The coalition is comprised of representatives from each collective bargaining unit as well as retirees. Votes are weighted and agreements require a 70% vote. Agreements are binding on all active and retired employees. Contribution percentages must be the same for all subscribers.

Mr. Donnelly stated that 8 communities in Massachusetts have adopted coalition bargaining.

Ms. Chandor said coalition bargaining creates a forum where management and labor can come to an agreement cohesively. Towns that have adopted this have been able to hold costs down and save money and can bargain changes within weeks.

Mr. Donnelly said that if the Board votes to accept Section 19, the unions would then create a Public Employee Committee (PEC) to negotiate with the Town. The restrictions of coalition bargaining would not become effective until and unless a written agreement is reached.

Selectman Firenze asked why so few communities have adopted this? Mr. Donnelly responded that there is some mistrust between the two sides. There are questions about how easy it is to get out of this system once it is entered into. Both sides must agree to do that.

Ms. Chandor said that the Dennis decision was a wakeup call to cities and towns that they cannot bargain to impasse on health insurance.

Selectman Firenze said that coalition bargaining would prevent the municipality from considering health care and compensation together as a total package.

Mr. Jenkins said that Section 19, unlike a normal statute cannot be revoked without a written agreement with the unions. Belmont would still be subject to Section 19 even if the two sides are not able to reach an initial agreement.

There was disagreement among the parties about when coalition bargaining goes into effect.

Selectman Firenze said the Board does not disagree conceptually with the idea of coalition bargaining. But there are certain aspects of this that he is uncomfortable with. This strengthens the larger unions at the expense of the smaller unions.

There was discussion of a provision of Section 19 that could allow the Town to become part of the state's Group Insurance Commission. This would provide many choices for employees but take the negotiating power away from the Town. Human Resources Director Diane Jenkins clarified that the statute has not been changed to allow the Town to go into the main risk pool of the GIC.

The Board agreed it would like to have a meeting with the Health Insurance Advisory Committee to discuss the issue in light of the union presentation after the rest of its business has been concluded.

Town Administrator's Report

Mr. Younger reported that the Town has received three proposals today for redevelopment of the central fire station. The Belmont Center Planning Group has them and will report on them by mid-June after having a public presentation on them. The Town has been officially designated as a "No Place for Hate" community by the Anti-Defamation League and will be awarded this certificate on June 7. The "Meet Belmont" meeting has been scheduled for August 29 from 6 to 8:30 PM. The Harvard Lawn Fire Station Re-Use Committee is meeting every Wednesday morning.

Action by Writing

Approval of Tree Warden Agreement

Public Works Director Peter Castanino appeared before the Board to recommend a new agreement including an increase in salary for the Tree Warden.

The Board moved: to approve the 3 year agreement.

The motion was carried unanimously (3-0).

Request from Former Police Chief re: Special Police Officer Status

The Board moved: to approve the request.

The motion was carried unanimously (3-0).

Memorandum from Metropolitan Area Planning Council re: Municipal Elections to the Boston Region Metropolitan Planning Organization

After consulting with the Board, Chairman Solomon marked and signed the election ballot to be sent in by mail.

The Board moved: to approve the ballot as marked.

The motion was carried unanimously (3-0).

Other

The Board moved: to confirm Richard Lane as Acting Police Chief.

The motion was carried unanimously (3-0).

Chairman Solomon wanted to meet before Town Meeting to talk about the process for making committee appointments. It was agreed to post a meeting for 7:00 PM on May 22 to do this. He also noted there will be a joint meeting of the Warrant Committee, School Committee, and the Board on June 7 to discuss long-term changes to the structure of Town government.

Mr. Brownsberger said he would like to compliment DPW for anticipating, monitoring, and responding to flooding issues. The Town has come through a significant rain event in relatively good shape. The work that has been done in recent years has borne fruit in a reduction in sewage floods in basements. And we were lucky that the storm was spread out over several days.

The Board moved: to enter executive session to discuss collective bargaining and not to return to open session.

the motion was carried unanimously (3-0). The Board entered executive session at 9:34 PM.

(During executive session, no substantive motions were made. The Board adjourned at 10:28 PM.)